

Delays in COVID-19 vaccination exacted a toll on nursing home residents in Ontario

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Armand Chainey and his wife Evelyne died of COVID-19 at a long-term care home in Kapuskasing.

COURTESY OF FAMILY

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-delays-in-covid-19-vaccination-exacted-a-toll-on-nursing-home/>

COURTESY OF TARIEN

The Guenette Funeral Home in Kapuskasing provides a grim snapshot of the toll the coronavirus has taken on the Northern Ontario town: Among the dozen death notices posted on its website, nine are for individuals who lived in the same nursing home.

The COVID-19 vaccine arrived too late in Kapuskasing to stop the virus from ripping through the Extendicare long-term care facility. The local health unit did not receive its first doses of the vaccine until late January, three weeks after the outbreak began at the home on Jan. 6, killing 15 of its 56 residents so far. The deaths include two brothers who died a day apart and a couple married for 70 years.

Armand Chainey, who was 93 and suffered from dementia, was inconsolable after his wife, Evelyne, succumbed to the virus on Jan. 23, their daughter, Eva Wiebe, said. “He was crying for her for two weeks, calling her name, and saying, ‘Come and get me. You forgot me.’” He died on Feb. 6.

The deaths lay bare the devastating consequences of the Ontario government not fulfilling its commitment to administer the first shots of the COVID-19 vaccines to those living and working in the province’s virus-ravaged long-term care homes, where 3,694 residents have died since the onset of the pandemic last March, including 1,455 in the past six weeks alone.

The Ontario government announced on Thursday that it has offered the first dose of the vaccine to 62,000 of the province’s 71,000 long-term care home residents. The province’s timeline for vaccinating long-term care residents is well behind British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec and Prince Edward Island, all of which finished offering first doses to all of their long-term care residents in January. In Alberta, 96 per cent of residents in long-term care and supportive living received a first dose as of Feb. 8.

Guy Bourgouin, NDP MPP for the riding of Mushkegowuk-James Bay, said he has asked repeatedly why it took so long to get the vaccine to Northern Ontario.

“It’s very concerning for the community,” he said. “They are wondering, ‘Why aren’t we vaccinated yet.’ It’s a sad state of affairs.”

Aside from PEI, other provinces in Atlantic Canada have been slow to roll out the vaccine to long-term care homes. In New Brunswick, only 2,840 of the 11,000 long-term care residents had received at least one dose as of last Saturday. Newfoundland and Labrador vaccinated

2,100 residents in its congregate living facilities for seniors, including long-term care, as of Feb. 9. Roughly 11,700 people live and work in these facilities.

Officials in Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia did not respond to questions from The Globe and Mail.

Ontario was among several provinces that pledged to follow the recommendation of an expert national committee on immunization by getting the first shots of the vaccine into the arms of people living and working in nursing homes.

The government unveiled its plan on Dec. 7, one it said was informed by science: Key populations were to be inoculated first, including “long-term care and retirement home residents and the staff who provide care to these groups.”

Ontario received its first allocations of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines in December. The Moderna vaccine does not require the same storage at extremely cold temperatures as Pfizer’s, making it easier to administer on site at long-term care homes.

“For the first time, we can take the vaccine directly to our priority groups,” Premier Doug Ford said at the time.

The vaccination campaign, however, got off to a slow start. The government also came under criticism for initially allowing others to step to the front of the line, even as the number of active resident infections in nursing homes climbed steadily from 695 in mid-December to 1,650 on Jan. 14.

The Globe has reported that some Toronto hospital employees who don’t treat patients wound up receiving COVID-19 shots before more vulnerable groups because the Ontario government and Rick Hillier, the retired general leading its vaccination campaign, directed hospitals to prioritize “speed over precision.”

The pace of immunizations picked up considerably in January, particularly in long-term care homes in areas of the province hit hardest by the coronavirus. In recent weeks, the number of resident infections has dropped dramatically to 369, as of Wednesday.

The vaccination blitz excluded most residents in nursing homes outside the Greater Toronto Area and Windsor. The government diverted much of the Moderna vaccine earmarked for these homes to virus hot spots.

Vaccine scarcity in Canada and delays in shipments – which are the responsibility of the federal government – have further stalled the rollout of immunizations to long-term care homes in regions hit with new, highly contagious coronavirus variants.

The variant first discovered in Britain is behind outbreaks at two long-term care homes in the Simcoe Muskoka region. At the Roberta Place long-term care home in Barrie, north of Toronto, 69 residents have died of COVID-19. Fourteen residents have died at Bradford Valley Care Community.

In Kapuskasing, about 700 kilometres north of Toronto, an individual who has COVID-19 and is “connected” to the outbreak at the Extendicare home has also tested positive for one of the variants, the Porcupine Health Unit said.

“This has been extremely tragic,” Lianne Catton, the health unit’s Medical Officer of Health, told reporters this week. “We did so well in the first wave.”

The Extendicare home accounts for 15 of the 24 COVID-19 deaths in the region. The health unit began vaccinating eligible residents at the home – those not sickened with the virus – on Jan. 28.

The rollout came too late for Ms. Wiebe’s parents. Mr. Chainey tested positive for the virus five days earlier on Jan. 23, the same day his wife died.

Ms. Wiebe visited her father outside his window the day before he died. “We couldn’t hold his hand,” she said. “That was the hardest part.”

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